

Russkie zavetnye skazki

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If one were to judge solely from nineteenth century collections of Russian folktales, the Russian peasant never swore, never abused priests or their wives, and indulged in procreative acts only in the most delicate fashion. The collections of the populists (*narodniki*), who were mostly school teachers by occupation if not training, are devoid of such things, as is the great collection in three volumes of Alexander Afanasiev. But Afanasiev collected many tales that he clearly intended to publish in his "*Narodnye russkie skazki*" [Folk Russian tales] which were banned by the tsarist censors on the grounds that they were obscene or anticlerical. Clearly, such tales existed and were in circulation throughout Russia.

The history of these tales that could not be printed in Russia until 1991 is most curious, but far from sufficiently studied. First mention of them dates to 1856, when the ethnographer and lexicographer, Vladimir Dal', wrote Afanasiev about them in conjunction with Dal's transmittal of several thousand folktales that were to serve as the basis for Afanasiev's three volume collection. By 1862 Afanasiev had compiled the collection of anticlerical and obscene tales known in manuscript form as "*Narodnye russkie skazki. Ne dlia pechatii*" [Folk Russian tales. Not for print]. Afanasiev died in 1871, and there is no evidence that he knew they would ever be printed.

Most probably it was in 1872 that the "*Russkie zavetnye skazki*" [Russian secret tales] appeared. (It could have been as late as 1875). The place of publishing was Geneva, that citadel of Calvinism! There is nothing in the first edition to identify any editor, publishing house, or date or city, and the facts have had to be teased out of a great variety of sources. Suffice it here to say that Yurii Sokolov long ago established that the tales were from Afanasiev's collection. They appear to have been taken to Western Europe, probably to London first, by V. I. Kasatkin, a young friend of Afanasiev. There the Russian emigre circles, which included N. P. Ogarev and A. I. Herzen, decided to publish the tales anonymously. Why they waited until 1872 or later to publish them is unknown. If the date was connected to Afanasiev's death, then there is in any case no mention of him in the book.

There are seventy seven tales in the collection, and this order has been observed in all subsequent editions. The tales have been catalogued according to the Aarne-Thompson system, and each is indexed in the "*Sravnitel'nyi ukazatel' siuzhetov. Vostochnoslavianskaia skazka*" (SUS) [Comparative index of types. The east Slavic tale], the indispensable guide to the East Slavic folktale.

Throughout the nineteenth century these tales were not officially known to exist, although it is clear that copies of the Geneva editions, usually the second (1879), circulated and made their way into both public and private collections. Nor were Afanasiev's obscene tales the

only ones collected. The next important collecting was not done until the twentieth century, by Nikolai Onchukov (1872- 1942), who spent the years 1900-08 working in the Far North under the auspices of the Russian Geographical Society (RGO). In 1908 "*Severnnye skazki*" [Northern tales] appeared, a very large and important collection of tales edited by Onchukov, but with the participation of the linguist A. A. Shakhmatov, the prose writer Mikhail Prishvin, and others. This volume contained but a portion of the total Onchukov collection, and among the tales that were not -- could not -- be printed were "zavetnye skazki," mistranslated into English as "secret tales." (The word "*zavetnyi*" was first used by V. I. Dal' in its Muscovite sense, "forbidden"). These "forbidden" tales were not published, but it is clear from the writings of scholars that they were familiar with them.

Some of the tales from Afanasiev's archival texts, in sanitized form, found their way into the three volume edition of the folktales published in 1984, and as they had been discussed in the literature by V. Ia. Propp and others since the mid-seventies, it is fair to say that Afanasiev's secret was out! But it was not until 1997 that Afanasiev's manuscript finally was published in its entirety, i.e., four decades after it had become part of the archives of the Institute of Russian Literature (Pushkinskii dom) of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg.* The manuscript of "*Narodnye russkie skazki ne dlia pechati*," constituting one hundred fifty eight tales (not all of them complete), appeared together with Dal's famous collection of obscene proverbs and sayings, many scabrous folk songs, tongue twisters, incantations, etc., in a volume that is part of a series of erotic texts, including the tales of Onchukov. The "Geneva" edition appeared in 1992 in an edition from Moscow and Paris with an important article appended by L. V. Bessmertnykh.

There have been several editions of Afanasiev's naughty little tales in English, and each has been reprinted. The first of them was entitled *Stories from the Folk-Lore of Russia (Rouskiya Zavetnuiya Skazki)*, and the translator is believed to have been one Charles Carrington, an Englishman who worked in Paris. This edition is reproduced by G. Legman in *Russian Secret Tales: Bawdy Folktales of Old Russia*, first published in New York in 1966. Besides its ribald illustrations, the edition of 1966 is noteworthy for its folkloric annotations presumed to be by the famous folklorist, Giuseppe Pitre. The latter discuss the tales within their Eurasian context, but ignore the Slavic roots entirely.

The other English edition is by Yury Perkov, whose edition *Erotic Tales of Old Russia* appeared in Berkeley in 1980 and then again in 1988. Whereas the Carrington translations often resort to circumlocutions and stylistic substitutions to convey the very racy Russian, Perkov's emphasizes the vulgarity of the original, and, make no mistake, the original is very vulgar. The Perkov edition does not include all the tales of the Geneva editions. He eliminates those based on word play as being essentially untranslatable. What the student of Russian and Russian folklore will find most fun, I suspect, is Perkov's inclusion of the Russian texts in the volume, although not side by side.

The most recent addition to the English language versions of Russian bawdy stories is a reprint of the old Carrington translation introduced by G. Legman, an authority on erotic literature, if not Russia: *Russian Secret Tales: Bawdy Folklore of Old Russia*, Baltimore, 1998 (ISBN 0-8063-4778-3) This edition features a new introduction by the noted folklorist from the University of California, Berkeley, Alan Dundes. Dundes faults folklorists and especially publishers -- past and present -- for their prudish refusal to countenance "obscene" folkloric texts. He notes that the collection of the brothers Grimm contained not a single risqué tale, as if the Germans had no such humor in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries! Danish and Norwegian scholars collected obscene tales in the 1830s, but the world could not know that until 1977. The censorship continues in almost every tradition. It seems to have been especially bad in the United States, and has continued to the present time. Dundes briefly recounts the dreary story.

Dundes is not on very sure ground when he turns to the Russian folktale, and here it is the Russian scholars writing in English who are at fault. He relies too much on the faulty translation of Yuri Sokolov's "Russian Folklore" in his discussion of Afanasiev, for instance.

Afanasiev's collection, in its second edition, inspired Aarne's ordering as may be seen by the fact that Afanasiev's numbers are often identical to Aarne's types, as is the general layout of tales: animal tales, wondertales, then tales of everyday life. And of course Russian scholars refer to Afanasiev's tales by his numbers and continue to this day to publish his tales in the same order as they were published in the second and third editions. So, too, are the tales of the brothers Grimm published in the same order from edition to edition. But Russian folktales from other collections are always referred to by their A-T numbers and certainly not with reference to Afanasiev's collection.

Too, Dundes can scarcely be faulted for not knowing that if the tales contained in this volume are not identified by A-T number, it would have been a simple matter for the editor to equip the edition with that information, as it is all included in SUS.

Of the two editions, the folklorist will prefer Legman's because of Pitre's commentary. The Russianist will want to read the tales in the original, and here the Russian edition of 1997 is by far the best. The casual reader in English will find Perkov's closer in spirit and language to the original. The obvious solution is to have all three.

*For reasons that remain unclear to this reader the edition was dedicated to the 850th anniversary of the founding of Moscow!